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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002367

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/26/2014
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SUBJECT: THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE: OPPOSITION PLANS
PRIMARY FOR AUGUST 29

REF: CARACAS 2248

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Acting Deputy Chief of Mission, for R
easons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) If the August 15 presidential recall referendum passes, opposition leaders propose a primary election, to select a unified opposition candidate for the follow-on presidential election. Beyond the apparent front-runner, Miranda State governor Enrique Mendoza, other opposition leaders inside and outside the Coordinadora Democratica (CD) have indicated that they will run in the primary. The biggest challenge for the opposition will be maintaining unity before, during, and after the primary. End summary.

Si "Si," Opposition Primary Quickly Follows

2. (C) If President Hugo Chavez loses the presidential recall referendum August 15, a follow-on presidential election must occur within thirty days according to the Constitution. Opposition leaders have proposed an open primary shortly after the August 15 referendum to elect a candidate to compete against Chavez in the presidential election. (Note: Opposition leaders presume that Chavez will be able to run in the election although no official decision has been made by the Supreme Court.) Fernando Martinez Mottola, consultant to the Coordinadora Democratica and leader of the group drafting the opposition's Governance Accord, told poloff on July 15 that the Accord will define the process for the primary. The Accord, released on July 25, is designed to provide a set of guiding principles for a transition government, but will also set guidelines for an opposition primary. The Accord states that the unified candidate will be "selected through a primary election and the candidate will promise not to seek immediate re-election in 2006." The guiding political, economic, and social principles are more broad than Plan Consenso Pais (reftel), but it shares the same short-term, transition period time horizon.

Open to All

3. (C) Martinez asserted that the primary would be open to all Venezuelans. Americo Martin, a CD leader and possible transition president candidate, told poloff on July 8 that he supported an open primary. Martin discounted the possibility of Chavez supporters skewing an open primary by participating. Alejandro Armas told poloff on July 16 that he supports a closed primary election where only people who signed the firmazo can vote. Pompeyo Marquez, a Coordinadora spokesman, told poloff on July 21 that he supports a primary restricted to the firmazo list as well. He asserted that the unified candidate of the opposition should be selected by opposition supporters. Alfredo Larrazabal, a Sumate leader and member of the "Group for a Unified Candidate" committee, told poloff on July 15 that the Group would recommend an open primary to promote a democratic, inclusive process to choose an opposition unified candidate.

August 29 - Calm After the August 15 Storm

4. (C) Many opposition leaders, including Martinez, have said the primary would be held on August 22, one week after the referendum. However, Martinez told poloff on July 15 that the Accord would recommend an August 29 primary. The days immediately after August 15 will be chaotic, Martinez predicted, and will not allow the opposition to begin the primary election process until at least mid-week. He said the opposition will need two weeks to process the referendum

results and then proceed with the coordination of primary logistics and campaigning. Larrazabal reaffirmed that the "Group for a Unified Candidate" would recommend August 29 as the date of the primary election. He said the Group is recommending a three-day candidate enrollment period and a nine-day campaign period between the August 15 referendum and the proposed August 29 primary.

Meet the Candidates

15. (C) Eight leading candidates have emerged for the opposition to date: Enrique Mendoza, Henrique Salas Romer, Americo Martin, Pompeyo Marquez_, Gerver Torres, Enrique Tejera Paris, Cecilia Sosa, and Antonio Ledezma. Other names have been mentioned, but various factors make their candidacy unlikely. Julio Borges, the Primero Justicia National Coordinator, is considered to be too young and prefers to wait for a later opportunity. Alejandro Armas, a Solidaridad National Assembly Deputy, is in very poor health. Manuel Cova, President of the National Workers' Confederation (CTV), has publicly stated that he will not be a candidate in the primary (and he has been a lackluster public figure). Of the eight candidates, Enrique Mendoza is the apparent front-runner, but 1998 presidential candidate and Carabobo state Governor Henrique Salas Romer is presenting himself as a strong candidate. The other six candidates appear to be unlikely to win a primary if Mendoza and Salas run, but are presenting themselves as candidates to jockey for political positions in an opposition government and/or present a particular political agenda.

Front-runners

16. (C) Enrique Mendoza is the front-runner in a number of opposition polls. The June 2004 Greenberg poll showed Mendoza as the clear winner in a opposition primary. While Mendoza is considered an important leader of the opposition and the Coordinadora Democratica, his support among non-aligned and moderate Chavista voters is weak. Armas believes Mendoza has legitimacy within the opposition ranks and should be able to win a primary. However, Mendoza might wait for the 2006 presidential election due to the Governance Accord's clause that commits an opposition transition president to not seek re-election in 2006.

17. (C) Henrique Salas Romer lost the 1998 presidential election to Hugo Chavez and has become an alienated voice within the opposition, particularly within the Coordinadora Democratica. Salas, who is Governor of Carabobo state and patriarch of Proyecto Venezuela, is rallying support within Carabobo by campaigning for the proposed primary in conjunction with referendum campaigning. Like Mendoza, Salas could win an opposition primary, but would face difficulty garnering support from non-aligned and moderate Chavista voters. Larrazabal, the Sumate leader in charge of the primary, said Salas has given initial indications that he would support a primary. A considerable fear within the opposition is that Salas would reject the primary and present himself as a candidate for the presidential election regardless of the primary's outcome. Thus, Salas and the unified opposition candidate chosen in the primary would compete against Chavez, which would virtually guarantee a Chavez victory. Like Mendoza, Salas has longer-term presidential aspirations. Due to political maneuvering and the re-election clause in the Governance Accord, Salas could decide to wait until 2006 to run for president.

Dark Horses

18. (C) Americo Martin, a Coordinadora leader and former leftist revolutionary, told poloff on July 8 that he is preparing to present himself as a candidate for the primary.

Martin said he seeks to gain support from Accion Democratica (AD) and Salas' Proyecto Venezuela (PV). Martin asserted that he can attract voters from the non-aligned and moderate Chavista camps, while securing the traditional opposition votes. He sharply criticized Mendoza's campaign, asserting that Mendoza cannot attract voters outside traditional opposition parties. While Martin could theoretically attract more left-oriented votes, his limited support within the opposition and nationally are inhibiting factors for his candidacy.

19. (C) Pompeyo Marquez_, a Coordinadora spokesman, has not presented himself as a candidate, but his name is often mentioned. Marquez_, an octogenarian and former leftist rebel, could use his less traditional opposition roots to solicit support from non-aligned and Chavista voters. In

addition, Marquez_ has broad support within the opposition. Group of Professionals for Yes, an organization that seeks to gain the support of 700,000 Venezuelan professionals, named Marquez_ its honorary director. While Marquez_ may enjoy the support of many potential voting blocks, he is not a strong candidate. Marquez_ emphatically told poloff on July 21 that he will not present himself as a candidate for the primary.

Long Shots

110. (C) Gerver Torres is the leader of A Dream for Venezuela, an NGO that promotes reconciliation and reunification through a long-term vision for Venezuela. Torres told poloff July 13 that he would present himself as a candidate, but he viewed his candidacy as mechanism to present his NGO's vision for Venezuela. Torres, until recently affiliated with Harvard University and a former official in the Carlos Andres Perez government, is not part of the Coordinadora. Enrique Tejera Paris, another octogenarian and career technocrat, has offered his candidacy, but has received little media coverage or opposition support. Cecilia Sosa, former President of the Supreme Court, told poloffs on June 25 that she would present herself as a candidate if "the people asked her to run." Antonio Ledezma, President of Alianza Bravo Pueblo, has been shunned by the Coordinadora and would present his candidacy as a means to advance his political career. Tejera, Sosa, and Ledezma have been active to varying degrees in the Coordinadora.

Comment

111. (C) Two distinct opposition strategies exist for the primary and the unified candidate. The opposition could shoot for their core constituency, particularly people who have signed the firmazo and are from traditional opposition parties. However, the Coordinadora could launch a campaign to attract votes from non-aligned and moderate Chavista groups. The above candidates represent both strategies. If the opposition is focusing on its core constituency, Mendoza and Salas are the leading candidates. If the opposition seeks to attract new votes, Marquez_ or Martin would be more inclusive candidates. If there is a primary, that vote will decide the candidate. If all candidates discussed present themselves, then a Mendoza or Salas victory is a likely bet. It is possible, however, that Mendoza and/or Salas will choose not to participate and recommend one of the other candidates. Considering that this is a transition presidency, political jockeying and "saving oneself" for a future election are distinct possibilities. In addition, the recently-released Governance Accord calls for the opposition's unified candidate to commit to not seek re-election if elected to the transition presidency.

112. (C) The first priority of the opposition, reflected in its strategy and campaigning, is the August 15 presidential recall referendum. However, opposition leaders and Sumate are working to create the framework for an opposition primary on August 29. An open primary two weeks after the referendum

will limit campaigning to the benefit of better known candidates such as Mendoza and Salas. While uncertainty will envelope the process until the actual primary, the opposition is working to develop a strategy that will select a candidate in an open manner and maintain unity.
McFarland

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